

COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and
restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.
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Why Historic Lime Was Used, Part 2

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During the decade following Juan Bandini's death in 1859, the old mansion fell into disrepair, battered by the elements and neglect. In 1869, Albert L. Seeley, a stage driver from Texas, bought the Bandini residence and converted it into a fashionable two-story hotel and stage stop.

The adobe façade of the L-shaped hotel was re-bricked and re-plastered and a small end room made of adobe brick and adjacent to the Seeley barn was rebuilt to serve as a kitchen. One interesting feature, according to the *San Diego Union* (June 23, 1873) was that "the outside of the Seely House (Cosmopolitan Hotel) has been plastered, and it now has, to all appearances, a stone front."

On-site investigations of the building discovered remnants of Seeley era lime plaster, including an exterior section of plaster scored to resemble stone

above the doorway to room #105 on the back courtyard wall. This indicates that the rear as well as the front façade was scored to resemble stone. The scored block has a smooth gray white finish and measures approximately 23" long x 11" high. The plaster is layered and is about 3/4" thick. It is by all standards quality work done by a crew of professional plasterers.

There are remnants of lime plaster also in the interior dating to the Seeley era, including a large swath on the end wall facing the courtyard in room #105. It is about 1/2" thick, contains horse hair (in the scratch coat) and fine white sand, and has an incredibly smooth finish, despite irregularities in the wall. The partition adobe wall underneath the stairway in the entrance hall (room #100) is covered with a rough lime plaster finish dating to Seeley's time.

The lime plaster was made the traditional way by firing the lime in a kiln, slaking or adding water allowing it to hydrate, and finally adding sand to reduce cracking and enhance smoothness and horse

hair to wick moisture buildup. Plaster was usually applied in three coats: a scratch coat, a brown coat, and a finish coat. The finish coat had additional sand, but no fibers such as animal hair.

Applying plaster is a learned art. Each coat must be allowed to dry or cure before applying the next one. Cracks must be rubbed out with a damp cloth or brush. The glossy, smooth finish on the exterior was achieved by constantly wetting or dampening the plaster and allowing it to dry somewhat before carefully smoothing it with a brush, trowel, or float.

Skilled plasterers by the mid-19th century used a variety of tools. To help level walls, they used wooden plaster 'grounds' fastened at the base of the walls and plumb-bob lines at the top. Whether this was done at the Cosmopolitan Hotel is uncertain given the layers of successive alterations to fabric. Suffice to say the walls in room #105 where I worked were not level. Padded wood floats were used to level off humps or fill in hollows in the wall. A long two-handed float, called a darby, was used to float or level large surfaces.

